CAPITALISM, INDUSTRIALIZATION, AND THE FACTORY IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA

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The early American factory seems self-evident. Through countless pronouncements, conventional wisdom has made this institution a central emblem of pivotal economic changes transforming the Republic—and the northern tier of the Republic particularly—between the Revolution and the Civil War. Mention industrialization in this period and think of factories growing steadily more plentiful. Nor is it just any kind of factory that comes to mind. Exemplified preeminently by visions of New England and Middle Atlantic textile mills, the notion of factory commonly associated with this era conforms to a fixed stereotype. Say factory in these years and think less of assorted possibilities than of a singular phenomenon: big and solid buildings; edifices filled with large numbers of workers, many of them of limited skill and often female; and structures brimming most notably with power-driven production technologies. Say early American factories and think of large scale manufacturing bolstered by machines. Think of waterwheels and here and there of smokestacks. What else is there to know?

In some sense perhaps not too much. Certainly there is compelling convenience in focusing upon this version of the early factory, for represented this way the organization of factory production yields a convenient shortcut to understanding the complex shifts encompassed by postrevolutionary industrialization. See factories and comprehend many of the changes overtaking antebellum manufacturing. Aside

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from such heuristic service, moreover, the concrete role of hefty mechanized workplaces—with cotton and woolen mills leading the way—was in itself indisputably significant. And a good portion of the essay that follows will thus inevitably draw on the story of these enterprises.

Yet, from another perspective, simply keying to the stereotype is scarcely sufficient. For one thing, invoking the early factory’s familiar representation does not address the vitally important issues of how and why this kind of manufacturing arose in the Republic, and of the ramifying consequences it unleashed. Moreover, even before taking up these fundamental topics, there is reason to go beyond the stereotype. Specifically, there is reason to begin our discussion by stepping back and examining what, at its most basic level, the early factory really was. And following on from this examination, there is reason to consider the twinned possibilities that the factory, whatever it was, did not provide the only vehicle for antebellum industrialization and yet, at the same time, that the factory, given what it ultimately was, cast substantial influence over the economy, in part because it could assume a number of different forms. There is reason, in sum, to begin by taking a wider and more contextually alert view of this institution. For only with this as our starting point will we be able to gauge precisely how the early factory participated in the recastings of manufacturing arising in the young nation.

What, then, was the early factory? Well into the nineteenth century, the word “factory” carried two meanings. There was, first, a definition dating from the fifteenth century that specified the term as an establishment where traders (or “factors”) conducted business. A second meaning, surfacing in the seventeenth century, deployed “factory” as a contraction of manufactory or workshop, a place where something was made. This latter meaning soon grew dominant. But it merits emphasis that while everyday parlance was likely associating factories with water-powered textile mills by the early 1800s, there was no formal lexicographical connection in the antebellum era between factory and mill, or between factory and sizable mechanized workplaces of any kind. Insofar as factory meant manufactory, it was a term contemporaries could properly apply to various arenas of production.¹

The gap between this record of relaxed pre-Civil War usage and the more precise connotations commonly attached to factories today is plainly substantial. And although this is not the place to delve into exactly when the narrowed modern connotation gained currency, the contribution recent historians have made to the process does bear notice. Because scholars have in truth played a salient role. Indeed, those of us who at one point or another since the 1970s have written about the antebellum textile industry may have done our share by willy-nilly advancing the impression that the mills we studied were the factories *par excellence* of their time. But probably more consequential in this regard have been the historians whose research has dealt with a range of non-agricultural work situations. The resulting inventories of manufacturing venues—especially those advanced by students of urban industrialization like Bruce Laurie and Sean Wilentz—typically distinguish between a small array of large, elaborately organized, and above all mechanized “factories” (filled with largely unskilled laborers) on the one hand, and a far more numerous assortment of less ample and mechanically more innocent workplaces on the other. Hence under this second heading we discover multitudes of: “manufactories” (hosting upwards of 20 or 25 hands); more modest sweatshops and garrets; artisan shops; and the often home-based work sites of outworkers.²

Scholars have thus in effect tended to adopt the stereotyped rendering of factories: factories as big and machine-equipped. Yet they have characteristically done so less to highlight the influence of such establishments than to minimize their presence in the economic landscape. If the factory they typically conjure up resembles the enterprise of conventional wisdom, it shares little of the panache conventional

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wisdom usually assigns to factories. Factories by many scholarly reckonings turned out yarn and cloth; they also included some of the foundries, armories, and printing enterprises of the period. But factories by this same estimate had little to do (for example) with the unmechanized outpouring of shoes and garments, two major sectors of early nineteenth-century manufacturing. So that far from standing as an icon for a new economic order, the factory enshrined in much of current historiography played only a modest part in the drama of antebellum economic change.³

Now this interpretive angle has much to recommend it. If nothing else, it underscores the heterogeneity that surely conditioned the transformation of pre-Civil War nonagricultural production. But there are also problems with this approach. For one thing, an analytic framework centering concertedly on large size and the presence of skill-eroding machines tends to downplay the myriad possibilities encompassed even among factories narrowly construed—even among textile mills. After all, concentrating on fixed definitional criteria makes it hard to remember that antebellum mills ranged from genuinely large ‘‘Lowell’’-style plants situated in northeastern urban or urbanizing locales, to scores of comparatively smaller ‘‘country’’ mills rooted in northern rural communities, to metropolitan mills that sprang up in settings like Philadelphia and that themselves extended from major free-standing structures to single floors of buildings, and on finally to the sprinklings of mills that took hold in the South—some of them recruiting slave laborers and all of them demonstrating that the concentration of antebellum industrial manufacture in the North did not totally preclude textile factories below the Mason-Dixon Line.⁴


⁴ On the antebellum textile industry see generally Caroline F. Ware, The Early New England Cotton Manufacture: A Study in Industrial Beginnings (Boston, 1931); Thomas Dublin, Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860 (New York, 1979); Jonathan Prude, The Coming of Industrial
But besides obscuring the mixture of forms attaching even to strictly conceptualized factories, cleaving to rigid specifications can present another difficulty. It can cause us to overstate the line between factory and nonfactory styles of manufacturing, turning an awareness of the many guises of industrialization into a misleadingly reified threshold that ignores both the back and forth hybridization often occurring between these categories and the presence of enterprises that performed like factories even while bearing little resemblance to textile mills. Seizing upon fixed standards, in sum, can cause us to misrepresent fundamentally the role of factories within the industrializing process. For although it may well make sense to concede factories were not as universal as early nineteenth century definitions imply and were less robustly influential than conventional wisdom indicates, it may well also make sense to insist they were more broadly diverse and significant than historians have come to assume.

To pursue this latter line of argument, however, requires another review of terms. What, after all, do we mean by "industrialization" in this period? Most writers on America regard industrialization as closely linked to advances in capitalism. But then what was "capitalism" in this context? The origins and initial character of capitalism on this side of the Atlantic (and above all in the rural Northeast) has of course been a vexed topic among historians in recent years. But by way of offering a few baseline propositions, it seems reasonable to posit colonial and provincial America as a milieu in which social and economic patterns that centered on limited market structures, on strategies of communal and household cooperation, and on nonprofit priorities coexisted with a systemic commitment to private property, with swatches of staple husbandry and wage labor, and with clottings of emphatically profit-gardeed mercantile activity and land speculation. Such a milieu was demonstrably not without capitalistic elements; and it would not necessarily have evolved into more full-blown capitalism in ways as seismicly wrenching as those the Old World experienced in passing into capitalism from its antecedent array of

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feudalistic and premodern modes of exchange and production. Yet it is equally plausible to propose that America, whatever its colonial precursors to subsequent economic development, exhibited a qualitatively augmented embrace of capitalism during the years of young nationhood. This quickening postrevolutionary metamorphosis involved a substantially deepened dependence on market relations, particularly relations attending nonlocal commercial exchanges. It also involved a qualitatively sharpened focus on profit as the guiding goal of economic transactions. And it involved for the most part notable increments in free wage labor and in the ranks of individuals who stood to such labor not as masters or patrons but as supervisors, employers, or capitalist investors.  

The deepened post-1789 grip of capitalist activity was by no means universal. While the South evinced growth and structural change (witness the presence of southern textile mills), the southern economy as a whole retained a distinctive trajectory (as shown by its sustained reliance on chattel labor, even inside textile factories, and its comparatively slow engagement with new commercial and other industrial ventures). And while the North, for its part, emerged as the region hosting the most vigorous postrevolutionary strides into capitalism, it too revealed hesitations. There were ample instances of northerners evincing outlooks—often grounded in traditional notions of community, household, and craft-based commonweal—quite at odds with the thrust of new developments. The novel patterns of capitalist change were consequently often surrounded and deeply conditioned by quite different orientations. Still, especially in the North, the broadly reverberating pressures and consequences of capitalist change penetrated both cities and the countryside.

"Industrialization" as it transpired in the early republic was an element of this mounting curve of change. Again arising most pronouncedly in the North, industrialization is best understood as a form of manufacturing generating expanded volumes of cheap goods intended for sale through extensive market networks. Deriving at times from domestic manufacturing (under which household members had

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forged items for their own use), but often building upon, and supplanting, craft manufacturing (under which artisans toiling alongside journeymen and apprentices fashioned products in their entirety and sold them principally to local customers), industrialization in this period was in some cases unquestionably aided by technology. But as part of the pronounced variability of postrevolutionary economic change, early industrialization could as easily proceed without machines as with them. What industrialization in this era ultimately required—what was ultimately its distinguishing feature—was a decisive increment in division of labor. America’s early industrial revolution rested above all on the ability of manufacturers to increase output and decrease unit costs by carving up production into smaller tasks.

And factories? Factories were venues of centralized industrialization. As a further sign of its innate heterogeneity, early industrialization not only embraced both mechanized and unmechanized work operations, it also enfolded markedly different configurations of laborers. The division of labor it rested upon could be accomplished by doling out subsidiary processes to networks of employees in decentralized workplaces, including the workers’ own homes, situated alike in urban neighborhoods and hinterland communities. Or it could entail gathering workers together in centralized work spaces. Or it might involve both centralized and decentralized arrangements. Segments of the early Northern textile industry, for example, were well known for combining the production of yarn in mills with the manufacture of cloth by outworking handloom weavers, many of them rural women laboring at home. But the point in any case is that the tilt toward blending divisions of labor with some measure of centralization was embodied in factories.

Early factories, in sum, were about organization as much as the length of work rosters or the roar of intricate machines. They were not a thing so much as a spectrum of things, and in some respects not only a spectrum of things but an ongoing process—the principal of centralization. There is thus no reason not to lower the minimal size of factories to fifteen or even ten workers. And if we do this as well as relax the technology requirement, we can begin to conceive of factories as extending not only through all kinds of plants spitting out yarn and cloth but also to at least portions of the manufactories, sweatshops, and garrets that were so important to northern industrialization. In its turn, of
course, enhancing the scope of our subject in this manner inevitably highlights and clarifies how the supposedly clearcut demarcation of factory versus nonfactory often in practice was crossed and recrossed. Thus we see that supposedly sub-factory workplaces (like certain small paper mills) were mechanized while irreplaceably large and mechanized enterprises (such as various armories) in fact supported contingents of highly skilled artisans. And finally, overall, reaching for this more capacious understanding permits us to appreciate how deeply factories were embedded in the sweep of early industrialization. Certainly, for example, positing these enterprises as both large and small, as both machined and machineless, alerts us to the frequency with which factories were synchronized with other, more dispersed formats of production. For it turns out that the combination of outwork and concentrated labor that subsisted in the textile industry also arose elsewhere in the economy. Indeed, it played out even in shoe and clothing manufacture where “putting out” soon enough coincided with “central shops” from which materials were dispatched but in which (even before the introduction of sewing machines and their female attendants in the 1850s) teams of cloth cutters and shoe workers took up stations. As in textiles, so in footwear and garments, early American industrialization joined factories and nonfactories at the hip.7

My aim in advancing this view is not to make definitional calibrations the subject under review. Still less is it my intention to so broaden the meaning of factory that what is meant fades into a blur. Factories construed as centralized industrialization—or for that matter as continuing processes of centralization—still stood out from abiding artisanal shops with their appreciably less divided labor; and whatever their bonds to outwork, factories were likewise still distinguishable from the plentiful instances of decentralized production.

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Rather, my purpose is to cast early factories in proper proportion and so illuminate how they did in fact fit within the economic retoolings of the new Republic.

But what of the other substantive issues raised at the outset. What, for instance, was the genesis of the factory? Where did it come from? Scattered versions of sizable workplaces with at least hints of division of labor can be found in the eighteenth century. (If nowhere else, they appear in the form of the notoriously shortlived cloth manufactories that doubled as poor relief by assigning the down and out to toil at spinning wheels and handlooms).8 A more trenchant emergence of factories, however, took place amidst the postrevolutionary push (most notably in the North) to augment manufacturing output. And this shift, expressed as often as not in movements toward industrial manufacture, reflected complex entanglements with demand. While evolving differently in different economic sectors, self-reinforcing circuits of demand and production took shape after 1789, ensuring that a growing desire for goods called forth increased manufacturing capacity, which then further stimulated demand. Facilitated by new governmental policies and credit arrangements, and critically bolstered by legions of western and southern customers hungry for cheap versions of consumer goods like cloth, clothing, and shoes, industrialization—including its factory variant—grew apace in response to a far-flung market that was itself continually nurtured by the availability of products.

The specific shifts in manufacturing which thus ensued could take place incrementally, almost seamlessly. In the northern countryside, for example, there was rarely any immediate sense of rupture when rural women slipped into the ranks of paid outworkers serving networks of industrial production. Many of these outworkers (like those weaving cloth for early spinning mills) were simply applying skills familiar to farming wives and daughters. And the goal initially drawing these women into their new employments lay less in profit-centered desire to maximize their family’s incomes than in the less disruptive (and less robustly capitalistic) wish merely to keep household

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Even the move to centralize production could at first seem conventional and commonplace. The modest requirements associated with setting up smaller versions of machineless factories (by clothing subcontractors, say) permitted these workplaces to sprout with little fanfare. Machine-filled factories naturally necessitated bigger efforts. Leaving aside the vast capital raised by leading Yankee merchants to finance the huge Lowell-style mills, early country textile factories required anywhere from $10,000 to $40,000 to get started; in 1855, paper mills in Berkshire County, Massachusetts needed almost $30,000.\footnote{Prude, \textit{Coming of Industrial Order}, 77; Christopher Clark, \textquote{Household Economy, Market Exchange and the Rise of Capitalism in the Connecticut Valley, 1800-1860,''} \textit{Journal of Social History}, 13 (Winter 1979), 178, 180.\footnote{Wilentz, \textit{Chants Democratic}, 116-17. Dublin, \textit{Women at Work}, 17, 19; Peter J. Coleman, \textit{The Transformation of Rhode Island, 1790-1860} (Providence, 1963), 93, 98; Judith A. McGaw, \textit{Most Wonderful Machine: Mechanization and Social Change in Berkshire Paper Making, 1801-1885} (Princeton, 1987), 133.} These were substantial sums. Yet they were not so great that investing in the smaller renditions of woolen, cotton, and paper factories seemed an unreasonable or unexpected tactic for congeries of moderately wealthy (rather than exceptionally rich) farmers, tradesmen, and storekeeper-merchants. What is more, the very buildings constituting the first wave of textile and paper factories tended to look familiar, bearing the appearance of barns or churches more than of some shrill architectural declarations of novelty.

But this vision of smooth and unreflected change has limits. Precisely because postrevolutionary capitalism constantly bumped against alternative attitudes and structures, the transformations in manufacturing after 1789 could cause disorientation and concern, with even changes originally experienced as benign ultimately coming to seem decidedly problematic. (It is not too much to suggest, in fact, that along with division of labor, the often-conflicted confluence of new and old was the talismatic core of industrialization in this era.) Thus, the northern hinterland women who shouldered industrial outwork to preserve their household status-quo might in the end worriedly realize first, that the cash incomes they needed to retain economic equilibrium actually signalled an accelerating dependency on the market, and second, that outwork left them increasingly
answerable to the intrusive authority of extra-domestic employers. But concern arose, too, over the specific introduction of centralized manufactories. Farmers worried about losing labor to factories, and in the case of textile mills they worried about the threat mill dams posed to customary access to local streams.\textsuperscript{11} And then, of course, there were artisans—in both cities and the hinterland—who at various junctures, and with varying levels of urgency, bridled at the competition brought by industrial production and its crystallization in factories.

If it is important to avoid presenting early industrialization as an untroubled segue from what came before, it is equally important to avoid describing the process as somehow automatic. To stress that many industrial ventures—not excepting factories—were physically and financially unimposing does not mean these ventures were any less a function of concrete decisions. Nor does noting that industrialization took shape in response to broad dialectics of demand and output preclude emphasizing that the entrepreneurs most directly responsible for launching these industrial enterprises, and particularly the individuals assuming significant proprietary roles, did so for their own clear-eyed purpose: gain. As stridently as anyone in the early republic, these figures (to appropriate a contemporary squib on one of them) turned their energies to “‘deep calculations and [their] calculations [were of] wealth.’”\textsuperscript{12} To be sure, this ethos was not so much unprecedented as unprecedentedly empowered to take hold and have consequence in America’s national economic environment. And even in this period, there was naturally a spectrum of ambitions. The expectations of a wealthy country mill master like Samuel Slater or the eminent business families directing Lowell were of a different order from the expectations driving proprietors and managers of most smaller textile operations—and both these outlooks differed from the expectations animating the hustling small bosses of many shoe and garment shops. (It is worth recalling in this context that in the early


\textsuperscript{12} The quote is from an homage to Samuel Slater printed in the Pawtucket (RI) Chronicle, May 1, 1835.
stages of industrial growth some manufacturing entrepreneurs willingly joined with craftsmen and farmers in supporting Democratic-Republicans against the aggressively capitalist agenda of the Federalist mercantile elite.) Nonetheless, if a firmer orientation to profit helped mark postrevolutionary capitalism, then the quest for accumulation surely looms as a particular causal motivation behind particular industrial projects. In fact, as recent research has demonstrated, even the introduction of machines into factory settings is best interpreted not as a metahistorical consequence of technological “efficiency” but as the thoroughly historical result of entrepreneurs guessing—ironically often on the basis of questionable data—that certain machines might yield acceptable returns. 13 None of this is surprising, for it amounts to saying only that the engineers of capitalist growth drew sustenance from capitalist dreams. Yet to say as much may remind us that amidst the countervailing pulls of eagerness for change and ambivalence over what change brought, the coming of industrial order—and of factories—happened because specific people acted for specific reasons.

The creation of factories did not guarantee their survival. The contingency implicit in the human agency behind the formation of these institutions continued past their origins. And this, along with impressive failure rates among early industrial ventures of all kinds, meant it was some time before antebellum Americans were persuaded that industrialization, and centralized industrial manufacturing specifically, had long term prospects in their land. Still, by the 1830s and 1840s (and probably earlier in the case of textile mills) it seemed broadly evident that factories would not soon vanish. Which raises the problem of consequences: what difference did early factories make, especially to the northern states they primarily inhabited?

Increased output is one obvious answer. But since I have already evoked expanded productivity as a defining aspect of factories, let us turn to other consequences. Let us consider, to start with, their cultural ripples. At least some portion of these enterprises acquired the

emblematic weight of standing for the whole process of economic transformation. Led by armories and (especially) textile mills, larger mechanized factories of the era became lighting rods in the formal discourse over change in the Republic. Should America industrialize? If so, need it (God forbid!) follow Britain's putatively degraded example of "satanic mills" and impoverished laborers or could it find more pleasant routes into modernity? Such queries in books, pamphlets, and speeches, not infrequently found voice through debates over factories—which in this sense actually did resemble the icon of industrialization set forth by modern conventional wisdom.¹⁴

But the impact of early factories upon the period's cultural politics was complex. If structures of centralized manufacturing exemplified a new order, they also mystified it. As a pronounced expression of the drift of labor from home to workplace, factories placed employees in enclosed settings not readily accessible to outsiders. Reformers, journalists, and even tourists might visit such venues, just as they peered "sympathetically" into settings of antebellum poverty. Such observations, however, were sporadic. And while glimpses into factories might yield the occasional glowing report, they were as prone as any descent into slums to carry the flavor of venturing into exotic terrains. By the same token, fiction proved slow to venture inside factories. And "better" paintings of the period (especially "genre" canvases) tended either to avoid industrialization or to offer distant exterior views of factories (usually mills) tucked into the comfortable middle distance of rural landscapes: a trope doubtless intended to soothe anxieties about factories but one that could not help contributing to brooding cultural uncertainties over what transpired within their walls.

On the other hand, postrevolutionary factories registered the opposite of mystery, for they were among the most rigorously monitored work settings of their time. Admittedly, other contemporary undertakings (including larger southern plantations) adopted at least the form of tight labor regimens. But the exigencies of coordinating centralized division of labor and, when technologies were involved, of

¹⁴ Thus the frequent invitation by proponents of industrialization to use the textile mill as a model for prescribed rural (and agricultural) reform. See Connecticut State Agricultural Society, Transactions (Hartford, 1855), 300.
enforcing the discipline of smooth machine-production—all this encouraged an intensified managerial control. (Indeed, factory-style management could even touch outworkers connected to factories, as when outlying garment makers were obliged to bring their work to employers for inspection, or more blatantly when factory proprietors drew outworkers into central workplaces expressly to impose greater control over them.) Despite gentle gestures of paternalism and intervening tiers of “inside contracting” within some establishments, early factories were cathedrals of concentrated hierarchical supervision. Extending (in many instances) from owners through bureaucratic “rules and regulations” and resident agents and finally down to room “overlookers,” the administration of factories demonstrated sharply calibrated lines of top-down authority. Especially in the North, and especially when set against the Republic’s supposed commitment to democratic political governance, this structure of influence could itself raise further concern over industrialization. But it assuredly also signified the means by which the opaqueness of centralized industrial work was balanced by efforts to regulate laborers precisely by bringing them under close observation.

And what of the laborers thus observed? What consequences did factories hold for their employees? Once again the answer is complex. For some working people, or for some of them some of the time, industrialization and factories held important leavening implications. Because it was frequently open to females, industrial employment proffered new occupational possibilities to women and girls; and for this constituency the conjunction of wages and the exiting from home that often accompanied factory employment (most famously premarietal employment in mills) could nurture new confidence and self-awareness. There were, besides, laboring folk for whom factories spelled outright economic relief: hardpressed hinterland families who

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signed on as household units in country mills; or foreign immigrants who scrambled into all available industrial employment, including factory slots; or transplanted rural sorts who secured jobs in urban manufacturing, again including centralized workshops. In fact, even artisans, for all their resentment of deskilled production, could benefit. More than a few master craftsmen turned into the entrepreneurs orchestrating industrialization. Others landed jobs among the emerging corps of factory supervisors or amid the skilled positions which (as suggested earlier) subsisted in some factories. All things considered, it was probably quite rare for full-fledged artisans personally to undergo demotion into unskilled or semiskilled factory jobs. And the low capitalization costs of smaller factories may have aided lesser craftsmen and journeymen in attaining the dignity of proprietorship.\textsuperscript{17}

But the other side of the balance sheet is no less compelling. To start with, the willingness of northern industrial enterprises to hire women, families, and newcomers did not extend to African Americans. The region’s industrial laborforce, and its factory laborforce above all, was cast firmly in whiteface, with the result that northern blacks were unable to participate in a significant sphere of paying work. Yet the workers who were hired did not necessarily find their situation benign. Certainly, to follow one fault line of industrial employment, the disturbance stemming from extra-domestic authority imposed on families through outwork weighed far more heavily when workers entered factories. For in practice country mills were known to intrude between parents and children on their payrolls, while mill girls not infrequently discovered painful dissidence between their roles as gainfully employed operatives and their identities as females in a society still imbued with patriarchy.\textsuperscript{18}

Nor were the financial rewards of factory stints uniformly attractive. Taken as a whole, industrialization expressed and exacerbated widening gaps in income distribution, and its most “sweated” spheres (in the non-factory outworker sectors of the clothing trade) held appalling conditions. Wages in larger mechanized factories

\textsuperscript{17} Dublin, \textit{Women at Work}, chaps. 4-6; Prude, \textit{Coming of Industrial Order}, 92-93; Stott, \textit{Workers in the Metropolis}, 65-67.

generally stood at the higher end of industrial pay scales, both for whatever skilled laborers they used and for machine tenders (though the latter mostly female operatives always earned less than the former invariably male employees). But smaller factories paid less well; and over time even managers of textile mills responded to mounting competition by maintaining long hours and restricting wage hikes below rises in productivity. As a result, factory work may have permitted some laborers to purchase some of the goods industrialization was turning out and needed to have purchased. By the same token, however, the income awarded to the bulk of less skilled workers nipped into through factory berths left wide seams of the industrial laborforce struggling to purchase the necessities of life, not excluding the manufactured items upon which they now increasingly depended.

Combined with the regimen of watchful discipline conditioning early factories, these tensions and constraints helped define the industrial order and turned factories into unsettled amalgams of opportunity and wearisome pressure. How—to raise the final consequence we will consider—did factory workers respond to this mix? How did they react to what they experienced? It is entirely possible to show that industrial laborers as a group more or less accepted all that befell them. Put concretely, it is possible to marshal evidence that such workers did not demonstrate permanent overarching organizational unity, decisive political interventions, or the capacity to launch strikes that were more than episodically successful. And it is possible to demonstrate that industrial workers in centralized workplaces were particularly cut off from effective resistance, their assertiveness vitiated (in the case of mill hands, for example) by their tendency to linger only briefly in given work sites, by the special difficulty women operatives faced in turning defiant, and (especially after 1850 and the infusion of foreign workers) by ethnic fissures.

To leave matters there, however, would be patently misleading. If early industrial workers did not all join militantly together inside a single long-lasting institutional framework of labor militancy, it is no
less true that numerous labor and labor-supporting organizations flowered in these years. Ranging from trade unions and alliances constructed on the fundamentals of craft heritage all the way to clubs and "societies" rooted in neighborhoods or reformist programs, these organizations provided intermittent yet appreciable links among laborers in industrializing situations. Moreover, such structured connections, issued at least occasionally into explicit political activities; and the trade-oriented liaisons fostered "turnouts" which, whatever their spotty efficacy, were frequent enough to disclose the strength of labor disquiet brewing in the antebellum North. Just as consequently, these linkages comprised institutional spaces for industrial laboring people to preserve plebeian traditions and transmute "middle-class" norms into their own codes of values and behavior—in other words to maintain and create elements of a working-class culture. And factory workers, even female factory workers, were part of all this. Thus women mill operatives assembled several organizations, enjoyed at least occasional and loose contact with other laborers' associations, and participated in petition campaigns to state legislators. Thus, too, residents of New England mill villages, assuredly including women, used bonds sparked by evangelical revivals to enact some of the most vigorous assertions of plebeian values to unfold in the pre-Civil War North. And finally, although textile employees were comparatively less enthusiastic about strikes than other industrial laborers, textile hands—with mill girls again prominent among them—mounted their share of turnouts. So also female shoe-workers (who had initiated job actions even as outworkers) played a crucial role in the great shoe strike of 1860.21

Such restiveness did not happen all at once. There were rhythms shaping the efforts of workers to push back, surges and diminuendoes in militancy according to the conditions laborers faced. What is more, some industrial employees may also have experienced what amounted to a turning point. Like other Americans, early factory operatives had

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21 A dated but still informative treatment of antebellum labor and reform organizations and activism is found in Norman B. Ware, The Industrial Worker, 1840-1860: the Reaction of American Industrial Society to the Advance of the Industrial Revolution (Boston, 1924). Also see generally Wilentz, Chants Democratic; Murphy, Ten Hours’ Labor, chap. 4; and Dublin, Women at Work, chaps. 4-6, 12. On shoemakers, see Blewett, Men, Women, and Work, 21, 33-43, and chap. 5.
to be persuaded that centralized industrial establishments were not a passing fancy. And there are signs that when certain of these laborers were so persuaded, their resistance shifted ground, becoming on balance less focused on dismissing factories *tutu court* and more on learning how to play the game of factory employment. Among these workers, portions of the structured responses just described—the forging of organizations and political actions, the strikes and cultural formations—represented exactly this latter kind of coping with ongoing factories. Hence, for these laborers, there were components of plebeian structured reactions that came only after factories were in some degree accepted. Which in turn suggests there were operatives for whom these same orchestrated reactions arose on the other side of a transition from more rejectionist orientations: orientations that had given heavy play to simply quitting factory toil and also, now and again, to efforts (or rumors of efforts) aimed at outright destruction of concentrated industrial facilities. 22

But there is also the suggestion here that even when workers had accepted that factories would probably persevere, resistance went beyond the forms we have denoted. Learning the factory game was a multifaceted exercise that often meant discrete as well as explicit and overt maneuverings. It meant that workers interrupted daily routines not just by turning out but also by covertly and individually stopping machines (to give themselves temporary respites) or by stealing material (to award themselves informal wage supplements.) It meant that inasmuch as laborers grew increasingly enmeshed in factory work (so an employment record of brief stints might actually involve years of moving among factory berths), there emerged cohorts of operatives who took advantage of tight labor markets by using the possibility of switching jobs as a softly voiced yet crucial bargaining chip with their employers. It meant that workers, displaying remarkable energy and ingenuity, confronted the novelty of factory conditions—the inescapable divisions of industrial labor, the discipline and supervision, and sometimes the "perpetual" machines—by unilaterally constructing standards of "acceptable" factory work. Though collective, this last

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22 The major threat of destruction came in the form of arson. See Gary Kulik "Pawtucket Village and the Strike of 1824: The Origin of Class Conflict in Rhode Island," in *Radical History Review*, 17 (Spring 1978), 5-37.
strategy was nonetheless at least initially another essentially undercover procedure, surfacing as directly confrontational only when the standards thus formulated were judged by workers to have been violated by managerial decisions to boost work loads or cut pay. And the sources bear hints of still more tacit gestures: the use of conspicuous consumption to signify wage earning autonomy, for example. But what has been said is perhaps sufficient to indicate that such quiet strategies may actually have been where factory workers invested their greatest energy. Workers under especially tight regimens may have been especially given to pressing their interests sotto voce. Indeed, it may be that the capacity of factory workers to formulate these strategies constituted their special contribution to both the strength and subtle texture of class configurations in antebellum America.\textsuperscript{25}

The early factory is manifestly not all there is to say about early industrialization. Braided into the heterogeneous alterations of manufacturing occurring in this period (and hence into the variegated moltings of postrevolutionary capitalism), factories were only part of what happened in these years. Nor were they irreplaceable. If early nineteenth-century patterns revealed factories as more than momentary experiments, subsequent economic “progress” encompassed the counter-growth of decentralized industrialization in some sectors and even (in recent times) the explosive rise of neo-cottage industries. Yet the early factory did have particular and considerable influence on life and work in post-1789 America. If we are careful, if we pay mind both to the meaning of the terms we use and to what else was going on, we would do well to think long and hard about the factory in the early republic.

\textsuperscript{25} Prude, \textit{Coming of Industrial Order}, chap. 5.